

## Translation

## Section 1

At that time when blessed Kentigern<sup>1</sup> used to frequent the desert wilds,<sup>2</sup> it happened on a certain day, as he was intently praying in a thicket in the wilderness, that a certain madman, naked and hairy and devoid of all worldly possessions, crossed his path like a raging beast. He was called Lailoken.<sup>3</sup> Certain people say that he was Merlin<sup>4</sup> who was regarded by the Britons as unique in his powers of prophecy, but the identification is uncertain.

When St Kentigern saw him, it is said that he greeted him in the following words: 'I adjure you, whatsoever kind of God's creature you are, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if you are on God's side and believe in God, to speak to me, explaining who you are and why you wander alone in this wilderness, a companion to wild beasts.'

And the madman immediately stopped running and replied: 'I am Christian, although guilty of so great a crime, suffering in this wilderness the evil fate which was predestined for me, to live with the beasts for my sins, since I do not deserve to suffer my punishment in the company of men. For I was the cause of the slaughter of all the slain who were killed in the battle,<sup>5</sup> well known to all the inhabitants of this country, which was fought in the plain that lies between Liddel<sup>6</sup> and Carwannok.<sup>7</sup> In this battle also the sky began to yawn open above me and I heard a voice like the sound of thunder, speaking to me from heaven: "Lailoken, Lailoken, because you alone are guilty of the blood of all those that have been killed, you alone will pay the penalty for the sins of all. For you will be handed over to the angels of Satan and you will consort with wild beasts until the day of your death."'

When I directed my gaze towards the voice which I heard, I saw a brilliance greater than human nature could endure. I also saw the innumerable battalions of an army in the air, holding in their hands fiery spears like the flash of lightning and sparkling weapons which they brandished savagely against me. Then when I was beside myself, a malignant spirit seized hold of me and assigned me to the wild beasts, as you yourself see.'

And with these words he leapt away from there into the unfrequented parts of the wood, known only to beasts and birds.

Blessed Kentigern felt great compassion for his wretchedness and fell on his face upon the earth, saying: 'Lord Jesus, this most wretched of wretched men, how has he lived in this squalid wilderness, like a beast among beasts, naked and on the run, his only food the grass! Bristles and skins are the natural coverings of animals and wild beasts and their appropriate food green blades of grass, roots and leaves. This our brother has shape, nakedness, flesh, blood and frailty, just like one of us, yet lacks everything which human nature requires, with the sole exception of the common air we breathe. How then does he live among wild beasts in spite of hunger, cold and a complete lack of anything to eat?'

So the holy bishop Kentigern wept, his cheeks drenched in pious tears, devoting himself more strictly than usual to the discipline of solitude for the love of God. He sought to obtain help from the Lord also with earnest prayers for that wild man, wretched, unclean and possessed of the devil, in order that the misfortunes and sorrows which he was enduring here in the body would stand as refreshment to his soul in the world to come.

Now this madman, as it is said, afterwards often came out of the wilderness and sat on a certain steep crag<sup>8</sup> which rises on the other side of the Molendinar burn,<sup>9</sup> overlooking Glasgow, to the north of the church of that place. On many occasions he disturbed St Kentigern and his clergy with horrifying shrieks, as they were singing the divine office. For he foretold there many future events, as if he were a prophet, but because he used never to repeat what he had foretold, although his prophecies were extremely obscure and quite unintelligible, no one dared to believe him. But they remembered certain worthless words and entrusted them to writing.

Now on the day on which he was destined to escape from the miseries of this world, that madman, as usual, arrived at the aforesaid crag, while blessed Kentigern was celebrating early morning mass. He was wailing and shouting and kept demanding in a loud voice that he should be deemed worthy to be fortified with the body and blood of Christ, before he passed over from this world. Kentigern could not endure this irreverence of shouting and sent a cleric to enjoin silence upon him. The happy wretch answered him in holy and gentle words, saying: 'Go, I beg you, my lord, to blessed Kentigern and beseech the grace of his charity that he may condescend to fortify me with the Lord's *viaticum*,<sup>10</sup> since today I shall pass over happily with his help from this wicked world.'

Now when the bishop heard this from the lips of the cleric, he smiled in a holy manner and said to those standing around, who were beseeching him earnestly on behalf of the vociferous demoniac: 'Is he not that wretch who often misled all of you, and everyone else as well, with his words and who has led a demoniac life amid wild beasts for many years and has no knowledge of the Christian sacrament? Therefore I do not think that it is profitable for me to give him such a great gift. But go', he said to a certain one of his clerics, 'and ask him about what kind of death he will die and if it is today that he is going to die.'

Therefore the cleric went and spoke to the madman, just as he had been instructed by the bishop. The madman answered him: 'I shall die today, crushed by stones and cudgels.' The priest returned to the bishop and told him what he had heard from the lips of the madman.

'Return to him', the bishop said to the cleric, 'since I do not believe this statement, that he is going to die in this way. But let him tell more truthfully when and by what death he will die.'

Now the bishop said this to see if by any chance that wretch could be found to be truthful and consistent in his speech, because he had never been in the habit of

repeating the same statement that he had uttered before but always spoke ambiguously and obliquely in riddles. Therefore having been questioned a second time by the cleric, the madman said: 'Today my body will be pierced by a sharp wooden stake and thus my spirit will fail.'

The cleric returning again to the bishop said what he had heard from the madman. The bishop called his clergy together and said: 'Now you also have heard for yourselves that he does not observe consistency in any utterance. Therefore I am afraid to agree to his request.'

So his clergy said: 'Lord and reverend father, do not be angry with us, if just once more we beseech your affection on his behalf. Let it be put to the test yet a third time, to see if by chance he is able to be found consistent in some statement.'

The bishop therefore sent a cleric for the third time and asked the happy wretch by what death he would end his life. The madman thus replied: 'Today I will terminate my present life by drowning.' The cleric was very indignant at this reply and said: 'You are behaving foolishly, stupid brother, since you, deceitful and a liar as you are, are asking to be fortified by a saintly and truthful man with spiritual food which is only permitted to be given to those who are faithful and upright.'

The wretched but now happy madman, restored by the Lord to his senses, immediately burst into renewed tears and said: 'Alas for wretched me! How long, Lord Jesus, shall I endure such a dire fate? How long shall I be afflicted with so many tortures? Why am I even now rejected by your faithful, although I have been guided here by you? See, they do not believe my words although I have foretold to them only what you have inspired me to do.'

Turning therefore to the cleric, he said: 'Let the bishop himself come to me as soon as possible, I beg you. To his protection I have been especially entrusted by the Lord on this day. And let him bring with him the consecrated *viaticum* which I demand and he will hear the instruction which God has deigned to impart to him through me.'

Therefore the bishop came, overcome by the many entreaties of his clergy, carrying with him the most sacred bread and wine. As he drew near, the happy wretch came down from the crag and fell on his face before the bishop's feet, bursting out in the following words: 'Greetings, reverend father, chosen champion of the highest King. I am that defenceless wretch who once appeared to you in the desert, wandering alone and astray enduring my destiny, still delivered over to Satan's angels. But adjured by you through the living and true God in the name of the Trinity, I recounted the reason for my disaster. You were stabbed with pity for the sorrows and wretchedness of this disaster, if you recall, and poured forth tearful prayers to the Lord, that he might turn to everlasting joy for me all the distress and misfortune that I suffered in the body in this world, remembering, of course, the words of the Apostle,<sup>11</sup> saying that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the future glory which will be revealed to the elect of God. And because the Lord took pity on me and heard your prayers, today, now that I have returned to my true self and believe in God the Father Omnipotent, as a

Christian of the Catholic faith should, so that you may believe my words, fortified as I am with these signs, the Lord has sent me especially to you today, in preference to all the rest of the chosen, in order that you may duly send me to Him today through the taking of his sacred body and blood.'

Now when the blessed bishop Kentigern heard that he was the man who appeared to him in the desert long ago and heard many other things from him that are not included in this little book,<sup>12</sup> somewhat converted from doubt to certainty and overcome with pity, while his face also was drenched in tears, to the wretch who was weeping and earnestly beseeching the grace of God he replied, saying kindly: 'Behold,<sup>13</sup> here is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the everlasting life of the living, true salvation of those who believe in him, eternal glory of those who receive him worthily. Whosoever therefore receives this sacrament worthily will live the life and will not die, but who receives it unworthily<sup>14</sup> will die the death and will not live. Therefore if you consider yourself worthy of such a great gift, look! it has been placed upon Christ's table. Draw near to receive Him in the fear of God with all humility, in order that Christ himself may deign to receive you, since I do not dare either give it to you or withhold it from you.'

The blessed wretch hastily bathed in water, and, faithfully confessing belief in One God in Three, he humbly approached the altar and took up in complete faith and with sincere devotion the fortification of the uncircumscribed sacrament. When he had received the sacrament, he held up his hands to heaven and said: 'I thank you, Lord Jesus, because I have now attained the most holy sacrament which I longed for.' And turning to blessed Kentigern, he said: 'Lord, if temporal life finishes for me today, just as you have heard from me, the most outstanding of the kings of Britain,<sup>15</sup> the holiest of the bishops,<sup>16</sup> and the noblest of the lords<sup>17</sup> will follow me during this year.'

The bishop replied: 'Brother, do you still persist in your folly, without having completely shaken off your spirit of irreverence? Therefore go in peace and may the Lord be with you.'

Lailoken, after receiving the episcopal benediction, leapt away from there like a wild goat set free from the hunter's snare<sup>18</sup> and joyfully made tracks for the desolate waste. But since what has been preordained by the Lord must come to pass, it happened that on the same day he was stoned and beaten to death by certain shepherds of king Meldred<sup>19</sup> and while he was in the throes of death he fell down the steep side of the river Tweed near the town of Drumelzier<sup>20</sup> on to a sharp stake which had been driven into the ground as part of a fish-trap<sup>21</sup> and he was impaled right through the middle of his body. His head fell forward into the water and so, just as he had prophesied, he gave up his soul to the Lord.

When blessed Kentigern and his clergy heard that his prophecies concerning himself, previously uttered when he was possessed of the devil, had been fulfilled, believing and fearing that the rest of his prophecies would undoubtedly come to pass, they all began to be afraid and the tears gushed down their cheeks and they began to praise the name of the Lord in all things, who is always wonderful and blessed in his saints for ever and ever. Amen.

## Section 2

It is said that Lailoken was kept prisoner for a long time by underking Meldred, and he was held bound in thongs in his town of Drumelzier in order that the king might be privileged to hear some new prophecy from him. Lailoken remained for three days without food and gave absolutely no answer at all to any one, although he was approached by many people. On the third day, while the underking was sitting in the hall on a lofty throne, his wife came in, conspicuously carrying on her head a leaf from a tree which was caught in her wimple. When the underking saw this, he pulled it off with his hand and, in pulling it off, tore it into tiny pieces. When he saw this, the madman Lailoken began to break into a deep laugh. And, when king Meldred saw him more cheerful than usual, he addressed him with flattering words, saying very pleasantly: 'My friend, Lailoken, tell me, please, what is the meaning of the laughter with which you piercingly assailed our ears, making them ring, and I shall set you free, to go wherever you wish.' To this Lailoken immediately replied: 'You captured me and ordered me to be bound in thongs, eager to hear some new prophecy. Therefore I shall pose you a new riddle on a new subject. "From poison dripped sweetness and from honey bitterness, but neither is so, although both remain true." There, I have posed the question. Give the solution, if you can, and allow me to go free.'

The underking replied: 'This riddle is very puzzling and I do not know how to solve its perplexity. Therefore give me another more obvious riddle under the same condition as before.'

But Lailoken produced a similar riddle to the one before, saying: 'Wickedness returned good with evil and goodness repaid it the other way round, but neither is so, although each remains true.' The underking said: 'Do not speak any more in riddles but tell us openly why you laughed, and the solutions of the riddles which you posed, and you will be set free from your bonds.'

Lailoken replied: 'If I speak openly to you, sadness will be the result for you and for me death-bearing sorrow.' To this the underking said: 'Although this is the way it will turn out to be, nevertheless we wish to hear it.' Lailoken indeed said to the underking: 'But do you, since you are a learned judge, tell me first the judgement of one case and I shall thereafter obey your commands.' The underking replied: 'Quickly tell me the case, so that you may hear the judgement.'

Lailoken said: 'He who confers the greatest honour on an enemy and he who metes out the worst punishment to a friend, what does each deserve?' The underking replied: 'Tit for tat.' 'You have judged correctly,' said Lailoken. 'Therefore without a doubt your wife has deserved a crown, while you have earned the worst kind of death. But it is not so, although each remains so.' The underking said: 'The obscurity of everything you do is wrapped in darkness. Therefore explain these riddles to us, please, and whatever can be honourably granted, if you ask, I shall give you.' Lailoken replied: 'I make one very easily granted request, namely that in addition to giving me my freedom you hand

over my body for burial on the eastern side of the town at a place suitable for the funeral of a dead believer,<sup>1</sup> not far from the turf where the burn Pausayl<sup>2</sup> runs down into the river Tweed. For it will come to pass after a few days that I shall die a threefold death,<sup>3</sup> and at the time when the meeting of the two rivers is close to my grave, the ruler of the British people will hold sway over an adulterous race.' In saying this he indicated the destruction of the Britons, and that there would be a reunification after their separation.<sup>4</sup>

While he was spinning out this narrative and other matters and putting off for feigned reasons what they wanted to hear, the underking and queen and their court granted his request for burial and affirmed with an oath that they would allow him to go free and unharmed wherever he wished. But Lailoken, when his bonds were loosened, standing ready to flee began speaking as follows: 'What is more bitter than a woman's gall, which was infected from the beginning with the serpent's venom? And what is sweeter than just judgement, through which the gentle and lowly are defended from the gall of the wicked? This woman your wife today conferred the greatest honour on her enemy, while you tore up your faithful friend into little bits. But neither action was really so, because in doing this you thought you were doing well, while she was completely unaware of the honour which she conferred on her enemy. The second riddle is similar to this one. Wickedness performed a good deed at that time when the wicked woman showed reverence to her betrayer. Goodness performed a wicked deed when a just man destroyed his own faithful friend. But neither action was really so, because each was ignorant of what they were doing. For a short time before while the underqueen was committing adultery in the underking's garden, a leaf from a tree fell upon her head to betray her and reveal her adultery to the king. By carrying it caught in the wimple on her head into the hall in the presence of all, the underqueen did reverence to it. When the king saw it, he immediately pulled it off with his fingers and in pulling it off he tore it into little pieces with his fingers. This is how the woman conferred honour on her enemy who wished to betray her crime, and how the king did injury to his friend who decided to forewarn him in order that he might avoid the charge.'

With these words Lailoken made for the trackless wastes of the wilderness. No one pursued him, but all alike began to nod significantly. The adulteress in tears and devising guile began to try to win over the underking with speeches as sweet as she could make them, saying: 'Do not, my lord and revered king, believe the words of this madman, since, as one must suppose, he had no other purpose in making his riddles than to seek release from bondage and dismissal. Therefore, my lord, I am ready with apt arguments to clear myself of the charge brought against me. You yourself also have heard along with us how that wicked deceiver said that he would die three times, which is undoubtedly impossible, since, after a person dies once, his death cannot be repeated. Obviously therefore both statements are equally false. Moreover, if he were really a prophet or a trustworthy seer, he would never allow himself to be captured or



bound by those from whom he would afterwards wish to be rescued. So if you cease to pursue him, you will seem to be cherishing the insult to me and the wrong done to your kingdom. Therefore, because the king's honour loves justice,<sup>5</sup> you ought not to allow such a crime to go unpunished, lest it happen that, by sparing him, the honour of your kingdom is lost.'

To this the underking replied: 'Most stupid of women, if I were eager to obey your words, *you* would be proved to be the foulest of adulteresses, while he would be proved to be a true prophet. For he said: 'If I openly report what you demand, there will arise from this sadness for you but death-bringing sorrow for me'. Now indeed our sorrow is obvious, while his sadness is hidden, so long as he survives.'

At these words the woman burst more copiously into tears, because she was not able to get what she wanted and she secretly prepared snares to bring about the death of Lailoken.

After some years it happened that Lailoken on that day on which he had been fortified with the divine *viaticum*, was passing through the fields near Drumelzier castle at sunset. When certain shepherds, who had been stirred up against him by the wicked woman, discovered this, just as he had foretold and as is written above, so we have heard, an end was made of him. The king, as it is said, handed over his dead body for burial in the place which he himself had previously chosen for himself, while he was still alive. That town is thirty miles distant from the city of Glasgow. In its territory Lailoken lies buried.

Pierced by a stake, and having endured stoning and drowning,  
Merlin is said to have undergone a three-fold death.

## Commentary

### Section 1

1 *Kentigern* Bishop and patron saint of Glasgow, d. c.612. The principal sources for his life are (1) the fragmentary *Life* already mentioned; (2) the *Life* by Jocelin of Furness composed somewhere between 1175 and 1199 (Forbes 1874: 29–119 [translation], 159–242 [text]); (3) the prose lections in the Office of Kentigern preserved in the Sprouston Breviary written for Glasgow Cathedral c.1300 (NLS MS 18.2.13b, fos. 35v–38v, printed in Forbes *op. cit.*: xciv–c) and probably based on a more complete form of the fragmentary *Life* including at least the boyhood deeds as well as the conception and birth of Kentigern. The verse portion depends on Jocelin. (See MacQueen 1956: 107–31; Jackson 1958: 273–357; MacQueen 1959: 175–83; Bromwich 1961: 319–21; MacQueen 1980: 1–21; 1987: 453–70.)

2 *the desert wilds* Early Celtic monasticism was influenced by the practices of the desert fathers of Egypt and Syria, and so the word 'desert' came to be used of any wild